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Estimates Memorandum

China and Afghanistan:
PRC Concerns and Ability
to Influence Events (U)

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SCOPE

This memorandum analyzes how the leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) assess and evaluate the impact of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan on China's global, regional, and military/security interests. Discussion then moves to a consideration of PRC ability to concentrate different elements of national power to counter the Soviet challenge. The most likely courses of action by the PRC during the next 5 years are analyzed and then discussed in relation to possible implications for the United States.

SUMMARY

A. Afghanistan itself is of little importance in China's strategic calculus. Rather, PRC concerns are shaped by Beijing's assessment of the global-strategic balance relative to the Soviet Union, PRC evaluation of China's position in South Asia, and, of least significance, by the perception of military threat.

B. China's response to the Soviet action is designed to halt what Beijing regards as the inexorable implementation by Moscow of a master plan to isolate China, control Western Europe, and ultimately achieve global domination. As part of this strategy Beijing also seeks to maintain its tenuous ability to influence events in South Asia and reinforce its identification with the Islamic Third World.

C. PRC leaders recognize that China is ill-positioned to bring its limited national power to bear in countering Soviet moves. They are also aware that China has virtually no power to affect events directly and that it is necessary to work through other parties. This weakness presents Beijing with a complex array of positive and negative credits. Positive actions with respect to one country engender negative responses from other countries whose support is important to China.

D. Barring unforeseen events, it is unlikely that Beijing's options will increase significantly during the next 5 years. More likely, the PRC leadership will continue the basic policies enunciated since 1980 while simultaneously probing for new opportunities to enhance China's influence. In any case, China's position will continue to be determined by Beijing's perception of larger global and regional interests rather than by modalities intrinsic to Afghanistan.

E. Chinese success in counterbalancing the Soviet position in South Asia could present the United States with new opportunities to improve relations with India. Similarly, enhanced Chinese influence in the Islamic Third World could complicate United States policy planning in the Middle East and North Africa. Finally, United States policies with respect to Afghanistan will continue to be regarded by Beijing as a test of United States resolve in opposing the Soviets worldwide and will therefore continue to have important ramifications for the development of United States-PRC relations.

Background: Rising Concern in China

1. Four events have forced the leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to gradually upgrade the importance attached to Afghanistan. In the first of these, the Saur Revolution of April 1978, the enigmatic leader of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Nur Mohammad Taraki, deposed incumbent Premier Mohammad Daoud. Although PRC leaders had not been particularly taken with Daoud, they felt that they knew him. Taraki's rise, on the other hand, unsettled Beijing because the leadership was unclear about the extent of the new Prime Minister's pro-Soviet orientation. Chinese fears increased in December when the Taraki government concluded a 20-year treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union. Chinese leaders perceived the agreement--described by both sides as an attempt to create an "effective security system in Asia"--to be directed in part against the PRC. Beijing's heightened apprehension appeared to be justified when, in September 1979, the more pro-Soviet Hafizullah Amin deposed Taraki. Finally, the December 1979 Soviet invasion and the installation of Babrak Karmal as Prime Minister forced PRC leaders to accept the fact that Afghanistan had become an important element in the calculation of China's global, regional, and military interests.

PRC Concerns and Objectives

2. PRC concerns in Afghanistan are influenced by several considerations. Among these are Beijing's assessment of the global-strategic balance relative to the Soviet Union, PRC evaluation of China's evolving position in South Asia, and, of least importance, the possibility of a direct military threat.

3. PRC leaders have three broad objectives in response to events in Afghanistan. First, Beijing wishes to halt what is perceived to be the inexorable implementation by the Soviets of a master plan to isolate China, control Western Europe, and ultimately achieve global domination. Second, China's leaders want to maintain their increasingly threatened ability to exert a modicum of influence on the course of events in South and Southeast Asia. Finally, Beijing seeks to use events in Afghanistan to re-enforce its identification with the Third World. This set of global-regional objectives directs PRC policies rather than pursuit of more narrow interests intrinsic to Afghanistan.

4. In the Chinese view, the invasion of Afghanistan is but one facet of a larger Soviet plan to achieve global domination (hegemonism). China's leaders also link the Soviet thrust to their actions elsewhere, particularly in Southeast Asia. According to Beijing's analysis, the Soviet goal is to dominate Western Europe. Moscow's "occupation" of Afghanistan helps to achieve this by providing a geographical and psychological springboard from which the Soviets will, by successive application of military and diplomatic pressure, achieve control of the oil-producing regions of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf. Simultaneously, through its Vietnam surrogate, Moscow will also try to achieve control and domination of Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca, thus limiting Western access to the Pacific. Having achieved additional strategic advantage, the Soviet Union will have effectively isolated China and will be better able to control Western Europe, and ultimately the world, than is presently the case.

5. In China's view, the Soviet threat is more political than military. Beijing judges that Moscow is aware that overt military invasion of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia would be counterproductive since it would provoke a united opposition and lead to the probable destruction of the very assets the Soviet Union needs. Rather, the Chinese fear that Moscow will achieve strategic dominance by using the threat of superior military force and proven Soviet ability to foment internal dissension to wring concessions from other nations and groups of nations such as Pakistan, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and ASEAN and thereby achieve political hegemony. Thus, China's leaders consider Afghanistan to be a problem of global-strategic proportions requiring a united response by those threatened by Moscow.

6. The PRC's leaders are also sensitive to the implications of the Soviet invasion for China's ability to maintain influence in the affairs of South Asia. Pakistan is a case in point. Ever since the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965, China has closely aligned itself with Pakistan. China's connection with Islamabad enables the PRC to exert some influence in South Asia and, more significantly, to pose a tenuous counterbalance to the Indian-Soviet position on the subcontinent. The relationship with Pakistan also helps in some ways to temper India's approach to the PRC because New Delhi must consider the reaction of Islamabad in dealing with the PRC.

7. Pakistan is China's best available point of access to South and Southwest Asia and, for that reason, conditions in Pakistan are of signal interest to China. PRC recognition of this reality has resulted over the years in Beijing's assuming at least a moral commitment to the defense of Pakistan. China clearly feels that its credibility is at stake and recognizes that any failure to render appropriate assistance would cause the loss of a regional strategic asset and an erosion of international prestige, especially in the Third World.

8. In the Chinese view, events in Afghanistan complicate the troubles of an already vulnerable partner. Beijing is aware that Pakistan historically is unstable, and that Pakistan's internal political dynamics have been unsettled since 1977. Similarly, Islamabad's economic difficulties have increased recently while, at the same time, various ethnic groups have continuously pressed demands for self-determination.

9. The Chinese are concerned that Pakistani vulnerability to the fallout of events in Afghanistan will affect the PRC's regional interests. The PRC has encouraged and aided Pakistan's emergence as a temporary home for Afghan refugees and as the major staging and support base for the Afghan resistance. Beijing clearly understands that Pakistan's role has engendered severe Soviet dissatisfaction. China fears that the Soviets and their Karmalist allies will use military force and/or assistance to various separatist groups to strain Pakistan to the breaking point. Pakistan would then, in the Chinese calculus, expect a level of assistance from the PRC which China would be hard-pressed to provide. In the absence of such aid, and, particularly if the United States failed to fill the gap, the Chinese fear that Islamabad would try to relieve the pressure by acquiescing to the status

quo and recognizing the legitimacy of the Karmal government. If this were to occur, China would find its already marginal influence in South Asia to be even more constrained and its credibility as a supporter of Third World Islamic states to be significantly reduced.

10. Beijing is less concerned about the purely military aspects of the Soviet invasion. Except for a small number of statements just after Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, there is no evidence that the PRC evaluates the Soviet presence as constituting a direct military threat to China's security. As might have been expected, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA) units in the Urumqi Military Region assumed a higher state of readiness just subsequent to the invasion. But, since early 1980, there has been no significant reinforcement or troop buildup by the CPLA to indicate that Beijing feels that a long-term military threat might emanate from Kabul.

11. Nevertheless, Beijing has made several important military calculations. First, the PRC views the invasion and subsequent military operations against the insurgents as illustrating the Soviet Union's ability to concentrate forces rapidly and to supply them and those of their allies in a relatively efficient and effective manner. PRC leaders are aware that Soviet capabilities demonstrated in Afghanistan can also be exercised elsewhere in the world and especially against China. Second, China is concerned that Soviet de facto annexation of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor effectively brings the Soviet border right up to Pakistan. Finally, and of greatest concern to the Chinese, is that Afghanistan, along with Kampuchea and Laos, has become a testing ground for new Soviet weapons and tactics under combat conditions. PRC strategists fear that the lessons learned in Afghanistan will result in a significant net improvement in Soviet military capability.

12. These factors are probably relevant to the continuing debate within China over military strategy and tactics. The Afghan insurgents are, in a sense conducting a "People's War" against a superior modern force. The CPLA would also be facing a superior military force and out of necessity on Chinese territory. It is therefore important that the PRC also evaluate the lessons to be learned in Afghanistan. Thus far, however, Chinese leaders have noted the staying ability of the insurgents and claim to be encouraged by the continued validity of the People's War concept.

PRC Ability to Influence Events

13. Beijing is not well positioned to bring its limited national power to bear in countering Soviet moves. Consequently, the PRC believes that the Afghanistan problem should be dealt with as one component of a long-term strategy for countering Soviet expansionism designed to increase the political and economic costs to the USSR. Therefore, the PRC must rely primarily upon actions by others. The combination of Chinese weakness and the complications imposed by the concomitant need to coordinate actions with other nations and groups severely limits China's ability to influence events.

14. On the positive side, the PRC is able to provide significant moral and material support to the Afghan resistance movement. In 1982, Chinese assistance reportedly grew to the point where Beijing provided one-fifth of the weapons in the hands of resistance forces in some of the northern Afghan provinces. Although the bulk of Chinese-manufactured weapons consists of light equipment such as the AK 47 rifle, recent reports indicate a small increase in the size and sophistication of military supplies reaching insurgent bases, mainly through Pakistan. These include limited numbers of B-10 recoilless rifles, RPG-2s, RPG-7s, and 82mm mortars. The nature and scope of PRC military assistance will probably continue to increase somewhat as the ability of the insurgents to employ more complex weapons increases. Second, Beijing is able to capitalize on the existence of its own Muslim minority population to establish its bona fides as a supporter of Afghanistan's "liberation struggle." Despite problems, Chinese support has had some salutary effect upon the cohesion and effectiveness of the Afghan resistance. This, in turn, serves Chinese interests because it underscores the Karmal government's lack of legitimacy and ties the Soviets down in a difficult People's War. Third, the PRC can mobilize international support for the resistance. Beijing's efforts have been important in securing some additional material and financial backing by states in the Muslim world.

15. However, despite the success of the resistance forces, and especially in light of overwhelming Soviet military superiority, the Chinese do not believe that military victory is either possible or likely. Rather, they hope that Soviet inability to prevail in a People's War will lead them to seek a political settlement. This goal, in turn, depends upon the complicated dynamics of Afghan society and politics, all of which are beyond China's direct influence or control. Thus, while PRC support can help to create certain possibilities, China alone does not possess leverage sufficient to directly determine the ultimate outcome.

16. With respect to Pakistan, China could provide additional amounts of economic and military aid that would marginally raise the cost to Moscow of an attempt to exert military pressure on Islamabad. On the other hand, the resource requirements for PRC modernization dictate that PRC commitments be minimized. Also, owing to the desire to mobilize an international united front against the Soviets, Beijing would prefer to reduce the visibility of its involvement and have the United States rather than the PRC be perceived as Pakistan's major supporter. Finally, major Chinese assistance to Pakistan virtually assures a negative response from India and the Soviet Union, thereby jeopardizing further the chances for a solution acceptable to China.

17. In the global arena, Beijing is able to maintain pressure on the Soviet Union by constant criticism in international fora. To the extent that this is so, the PRC has helped to establish a body of critical world opinion. China's leaders are aided in this effort by the fact that Afghanistan, despite Karmalist assertions of socialism, remains, in the perception of the international community both a Third World and an Islamic nation. Hence the image of an hegemonistic superpower committing aggression against a weaker nation gains credibility. However, because China is unable to translate world

opinion into concerted action, Beijing can only point out what it considers to be the dangers and then wait while other nations respond according to their own interests.

Prospects

18. It is not likely that Beijing's options will increase significantly during the next 5 years. More likely, the PRC leadership will continue the basic thrust of the policies enunciated and developed since 1980, while simultaneously probing for opportunities to enhance China's influence. China's position will continue to be determined more by Beijing's perception of larger global and regional interests rather than by modalities intrinsic to Afghanistan.

19. In order to offset Chinese weaknesses, Beijing will continue to treat the Afghanistan problem as part of a larger strategic challenge emanating from the Soviet Union. In emphasizing the global aspects of the problem, Beijing will be able to continue to enhance its image as an advocate of Third World interests at the expense of the Soviet Union. As one aspect of this strategy, the PRC will emphasize the religious dimension of the Afghanistan problem as part of a larger effort to develop greater common ground with the nations of the Middle East and North Africa.

20. In the absence of any change in Soviet posture, China will also continue its moral and material support for the Afghan resistance forces. However, because shifts in the cohesiveness of the resistance, continuing sensitivity to Pakistani concerns about possible Soviet reprisal, and because the need to deliver assistance through third parties will limit the scope of Beijing's effort, the number and sophistication of weapons provided by Beijing likely will increase slightly during the next 2-3 years and thereafter stabilize.

21. Beijing's recognition of the threat to its regional interests inherent in the possible collapse of Pakistan will continue to be an important determinant of its policies. China will continue to provide moderate amounts of military and other assistance to Pakistan according to the availability of resources. Beijing likely will also press the United States and other real and potential supporters of Pakistan to maintain aid at present levels and even to increase their assistance.

22. Regional interests will also affect Beijing's relations with India. In the Sino-Soviet-Indian triangle, Beijing will try to encourage India to be more openly critical of the Soviet action. It will attempt to continue to reduce tensions with New Delhi by increasing trade and by reaffirming the desire to resolve border disputes, thus complicating the Soviet position. However, Chinese overtures to India will raise fears in Pakistan and Chinese sensitivity to Pakistani concerns, coupled with Soviet pressure on India, will probably slow the progress of improving PRC-Indian relations during the next 3-5 years.

23. In like manner the Afghanistan problem will continue to inhibit development of a full range of close Sino-Soviet relations. However, it will not stand in the way of significant positive adjustments in economic, scientific, and cultural ties with Moscow. In the immediate future, Beijing will continue to insist upon total Soviet withdrawal and replacement of the Karmalists by a more broadly-based government. At the same time, Chinese intransigence on this issue will likely be modified by consideration of the real benefits that could be derived from a more "normal" relationship with Moscow. For example, by warming relations, China's reformist leaders could reduce their vulnerability to continuing criticism by domestic political opponents for identifying too closely with the United States. Also, additional Soviet trade and technology transfer would help modernize China's industrial plant, most of which was built with Soviet assistance and along Soviet lines in the 1950s. Finally, Beijing will remain aware that China possesses very limited ability to influence Soviet policies in Afghanistan.

Implications for the United States

24. China's position on Afghanistan springs logically from the anti-Soviet orientation of its foreign policy which we believe will continue through the next 3-5 years. We also believe that Beijing has generally not been dissatisfied by the United States response to events in Afghanistan and further that the positive evaluation of US actions there encouraged the PRC leadership to maintain the present policy orientation which, on the whole, favors United States interests. This, in turn, suggests that any perception by China of a diminution of United States concern or willingness to continue to work for change in Afghanistan, could adversely impact on Sino-US relations. Washington's policy with respect to Afghanistan will continue to be regarded by Beijing as a test of United States resolve in opposing the Soviets worldwide and will therefore continue to have important ramifications for the development of PRC relations with the United States.

25. If the prospects for improved relations between China and India materialize, the United States could be presented with new possibilities for improving its long-deteriorated relations with India. A reduction in India's perception of threat from the PRC could well encourage India to continue to explore the possibility of reducing identification with Moscow. In the event of loosened Soviet-Indian ties, the United States could find India to be more receptive to overtures for expanded relations and thereby gain some ability to counter Soviet influence in South Asia. Although improved US-Indian relations could complicate further the US-Pakistan link, there is no a priori reason to assume that Pakistan would oppose such US initiatives.

26. A successful PRC effort to develop greater influence among the nations of the Middle East and North Africa by emphasizing the religious dimension of the Afghanistan problem could pose a problem for the United States. Given that China and the United States are divided on major issues in these regions, enhanced PRC influence there could dilute further the already tenuous ability of moderate Arab leaders to exert leverage over their more radical compatriots. Such a reduction in the influence of the Arab moderates could further complicate US policy planning.